I will discuss possible approaches to the use of semiotics, semantics and pragmatics in the analysis of advertising discourses in English language media. I will discuss the rhetoric of the image and the stylistics of consumption. The aim of this article is twofold: by analysing advertising discourse, I want to gain insight into the construction of advertisements and at the same time provide a means for a de-manipulative look at the discursive construction of social and cultural identities through consumption. This leads into the linguistic and semiotic analysis of advertising texts and images using a constructionist approach, combined with the analytical framework of social semiotics, visual design, rhetoric, stylistics, text linguistics, and critical discourse analysis.

What is my point? It is the following: that actually the consumption of meanings is important and not the consumption of goods. Of course, you buy goods as items, but what you need is their meanings and not the items as such. You could very well do with other, similar goods, not necessarily the ones you bought. What I am saying is that the purchase, the possession and the use of goods, i.e. the consumption of goods in a broad sense, have become prime signifiers in our lives and are thus instrumental in the discursive construction of identity.

As a social constructionist I do not believe in essentialism, which means things do not mean anything by themselves. They may or may not exist, ontologically speaking, but they are senseless before we assign meanings to them, mostly meanings shared within a society. So in a sense, we make them, produce them. Facts – facts derives from Latin *factum* which means ‘the produced’ and this is exactly what we are dealing
with: ‘the produced’ constructed in our own representation of reality. We as societies make things mean, create facts.

We are constructing reality, in its interpretations and representations in our minds. So everything we know is constructed. I am not denying that there is a wall. I notice that there is a wall when I walk into it. But I am not concerned with the ontological reality of the thing out there. I am concerned with the representation of this outside reality in our minds. In this sense this wall is not a wall. It is a wall only because we interpret it as such. It is not solid because there is no solid matter. It is actually that strong that I cannot walk through it because inside it is highly unstable. It is ‘full’ of electrons, neutrons, anions, positrons and all these other particles, moving around incredibly fast and that is why I cannot go through. It is a wall because I say it is a wall or because you say it is a wall or because we all say it is a wall, and because we all agree, it is a wall and not because it is a wall. (Cf. von Foerster, von Glasersfeld 1999, von Foerster, von Glasersfeld, Watzlawick, Schmidt et al. 1997, von Glasersfeld 1997, Watzlawick 1981).

If reality is a construction, truth as a monolithic, unquestionable epistemic category does not exist. There are only different truths at different times. If we here in our society agree on something, then this is true for us here and now. If we don’t agree, it is not true. There is no truth independent of our current interpretations which in turn depend on our cultures. Martyrs and believers have died because of this, scientists and dissidents went to prison because of this (this is what drives innovation and change), racism, xenophobia, populists and dictators thrive on this. Their own truth. It does not exist.

Consumption of goods has become a symbolic activity and thus meaningful for the social construction of identity. Now I am not talking about the wall any more, now I am talking about us as persons, the construction of the meanings of our selves, i.e. our identities, and about the social communication of interpretations of our selves to others, which seems to be one of the most central activities in our lives. We are not careless in our projections of our identities, instead trying to present meanings to others that we assume they consider desirable. We are therefore constantly presenting signifiers of our sociability, our competence, our intelligence, and our beauty irrespective of whether the signifiers point to any signifieds at all. But who cares?

Consumption, i.e. the purchase, possession and use of goods and services, as already mentioned has become the major signifier in today’s society. We consume something in order to project an identity of ourselves to others. We live in a consumer society; this is what we participate in. As we live in a consumer society we have to consume in order to belong. And we want to belong. You sign up to the consumer society’s ethos by consuming; you are the *pouvoir constituant* of the consumer society and you give it its consumerist ethos and subject yourself to it at the
same time. You produce the society’s consumer ethos and reify it by consuming.


Assume it is winter in the Northern hemisphere. You buy a coat because it is cold and you wear this coat because it is cold. But you buy the specific coat because you want to project an image of yourself to the coat-wearers and non-coat-wearers around you, and not because it is a warm coat, but because it is an Yves-Saint-Laurent-coat or a Barbour-jacket. Why are you wearing Barbour? It means you are an upper class person (e.g. aristocrat hunter). There are additional meanings. Why do I buy Nike shoes? Because I want to project cool sportiveness, because I am a second Messi or a third Beckham. Why do I drink Red Bull? Because I think Felix Baumgartner is cool. Because I like the Red Bull Air Race. Because I’ve heard of Hangar Five. I do not consume Red Bull, I consume Red Bull Media. There is nothing less important to Red Bull than the sugary liquid in the can. What is important is cliff divers, daredevil pilots, extreme runners, base jumpers and stratospheric “I am going home”-guys. May I repeat: It is not the product, but the meanings of the product that we consume for the construction of our selves.

Now, how do we consume meanings? We do this by a transfer, a transfer of meanings of something in the advertisement through an objective correlative.

In the print advertisement, the scenario presented in the text and the image constitute an objective correlative for the quality and value of the emotional satisfaction of a need or desire. The scenario usually represents desirable social circumstances – usually, but not necessarily including the product to be promoted and the consumer – circumstances that emphasize social attraction and integration associated with beauty and happiness. Such an objective correlative is tightly linked to the consumption of the product advertised so that eventually product, scenario and desired social identity features become merged in people's minds. In other words, the consumption of the product is supposed to conceptually transfer this quality and value to the consumer. So we have bought a signifier after we have followed the advertisement to the point of action, we have bought a meaning, not a function.

The most important social desire is that we want to belong to a group and to be loved by others. And we believe that we need to consume what we think makes us loved because we want to be loved. This is why advertising works.

The idea of the objective correlate is taken from T.S. Eliot’s essay “Hamlet and his problems” (1919), where he says that you need the objective correlative to express emotions in art. Art touches you through the objective correlative. Art does something to you, changes something in you, and makes you feel something.
The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’: in other words a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts which must terminate in sensory experience are given the emotion is immediately evoked.

What Hamlet is for Eliot, Dove, Head and Shoulders, and Chanel No 5 are for me. It is my claim that advertising is actually a form of art, by finding an objective correlative, in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which is the formula for that particular emotion, such that when the external facts terminate (this means you don’t look at the advertisement any more), you can still bring the emotion back by remembering the ad.

How and why do we consume meaning? We can sum this up with references to important social theoretical concepts:

- The regime of representation (the discursive construction of reality, cf. Foucault 1980, 1988)
- talks you into existence in order to consume a sign (the commodification of meaning, cf. Baudrillard 2005)
- or being part of something (through e.g. shared tastes, cf. Bourdieu 2001)
- in order to be someone (in order to have someone (in order to be someone...)) (cf. Freud 1948)
- to create your own regime of truth in the endless construction of myths (cf. Barthes 1957).

Let me explain. The regime of representation produces the discursive construction of reality. This also means you are discursively constructing yourself, primarily by the meanings of the things you consume. This is what Jean Baudrillard (2005) calls the commodification of meaning: you buy meaning by consuming commodities endowed with meaning.

We consume a sign with the aim of taking part in something, this means to look at other people and to be seen by other people. While doing so, there is a certain voyeuristic pleasure for all of us. Why do we have reality TV, why do we enjoy watching ordinary or non-ordinary people doing ugly stuff, eating ugly stuff and why are they taking part in these modern-day circuses? Because we are voyeuristic and exhibitionist, i.e. we want to look and be seen. This is a major idea in Walter Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk* (1982).

The idea of fashion is the immediate result of the aim of taking part in or being part of something through shared tastes. None of us is dressed as in 1850. Why not? Because it would be funny. People would laugh at us. This is why we don’t do it. There is nothing wrong with it as such. Per-
haps a bit stiff and heavy. Today we have to be relaxed and cool. This is nothing but an attitude that we have to have in order to be able to share with other people, in order to belong. If you are not a relaxed and cool follower of fashion, you don’t belong.

Shared tastes: in order to be someone, and why do we want to be someone? Because we want to have someone. And why do we want to have someone? Because we want to be someone. And so on and so forth, and therefore it never ends. And why do we do all that? In order to create our own regime of truth in the endless construction of myths.

A regime of truth is constructed through discourse. We are embedded in discourse. We read newspapers, we listen to the radio, we watch TV, we talk to people, everything we get is discourse about something. Here in Austria at the end of 2012, for example, we have a discourse of corruption in the media, Grasser, Meischberger, Hochegger, Birnbacher, Martinz, Mensdorff-Pouilly, Strasser, Scheuch and twenty other names. We did not know about them before, but now and for some time to come they will be part of our discourse. We are constructing reality through discourse. For example think of something like hysteria. This illness started around 1860 and it ended more or less around 1960. Before and after there was no hysteria. It was constructed through the discourse, through institutions, through academics, through people like me teaching about hysteria to people like you at the time.

We consume these meanings by way of consuming – i.e. buying, possessing, using – the product, so that the latter is gradually losing its importance as a level in its own right, turning into a signifier instead. This makes it possible for us in our construction of our own selves to take part in or be part of something in order to be someone in order to have someone, in order to belong to an imagined community, whatever it is.

Our question is now: How do we construct a sign? How do we mean? How does it happen that we mean? What do we do in order to mean?

And the next question is: How do we construct a myth? How do we unmean? First we mean something, and then we unmean something.

How do we mean? We mean by using linguistic signs, and the most famous example of a model of the linguistic sign is Ferdinand de Sausure’s (1916:33) model, which was later modified by Ogden and Richards (1923:11).
De Saussure starts here with the form, which he calls in French le signifiant, and this evokes the le signifié, the concept. The signifier is the physical form of the sign, this means what you hear when I, for example, utter the word desk. You hear desk. And this invokes in your mind the signified, the idea, the concept of a desk.

This connection is arbitrary. We do not know why we call something desk or table. We do not know why we call these things by these words. Once the connection between form and meaning has been established, you have to use the form to evoke the meaning. You cannot walk around and call this table horse. Well, I could, but if I persist, I will be institutionalized. So society does not accept horses for tables. The linguistic sign is arbitrary but conventional. This means you have to follow the rules of society in order to communicate.

Not all signs are arbitrary, though. According to Charles Sanders Peirce (1982-89), an American philosopher, we can distinguish between three types of signs based on the relationship between signifier and signified (besides other distinctions he introduced): first, there is an icon. An icon is a sign where there is a relationship of similarity between the signifier and the signified. This means this relationship is motivated. This is why you have your picture in your passport. It identifies you, assuming that the picture is sufficiently similar to your current appearance.

Second, an index is a sign where there is a contiguity or causality relationship between the signifier and the signified. For example, when you see smoke, what is this an index of? Fire, because we know that fire produces smoke. Or when you see clouds, then you will say or think something like “It’s going to rain,” because rain comes from clouds.

The third type is the symbol, which is a sign where there is an arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. So all of language (or most of it) is symbolic. All the words in language are symbols because there is an arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. So language is the symbolic system in human communication.

Having discussed the sign, let us now move on to myths. This is a term coined by Roland Barthes (2001 [originally 1957]:187-188) in his book Mythologies, where he claims that in myth there are two semiological systems operating on top of each other, the second system emptying the first one of its meaning and changing the sign into a myth, meaning something else. This is where my unmean from above comes in. The myth changes the meaning.

The first system is the normal linguistic system; you have a signifier and a signified, a word and then a concept that is evoked. And this means something. On the level of myth, this sign now enters into a second system of meaning as a new signifier. The linguistic sign becomes a signifier again and is related to a signified that creates another meaning, a second meaning, which empties the first sign of its meaning.

Here is Barthes’ example from advertising.
This is an advertisement for spaghetti. Why is there a net? What does this mean? Perhaps daily shopping at the local market. Why is the background color red? What does red mean here? Perhaps tomato sauce. We have the fresh vegetables, there are onions, there is a tomato, and there is mushroom. What do they mean? What does this advertisement do to us? We get fresh market produce, Panzani spaghetti and sauce, this is Italian (the name and the colors of the Italian flag on the product), and natural freshness. But the problem is that we have all this in the shape of an industrial French product. The sauce comes in a tin, pâte, sauce, parmesan, à l’italienne de luxe. It’s an industrial French product and it produces in us the idea of natural fresh Italianness! This is a myth. The French meaning is gone. So how do you turn an industrial French copy into a natural Italian original? Here are the two steps:

Myth
First level of signification:
Signifier: Panzani (plus pictorial elements)
Signified: French Pasta and sauce
Sign: French pasta and sauce with an Italian name
Second level of signification:
Signifier: French pasta and sauce with an Italian name
Signified: Italianness
Sign: Italian pasta and sauce (original, real, fresh, natural, good, home-made, etc.)
Look at my next example:


This is an advertisement for a perfume by Christian Dior with the name *Hypnotic Poison*. We see a woman. The background is red. What does red mean here? Perhaps passion and love. She also wears a string (or necklace) of red pearls. What do strings do to people? They keep people in place. There is an element of danger, action, dynamics, temptation. There is something dangerous about her. Her eyes look like a cat’s eyes. What about her finger nails? What is she going to do with these finger nails? Perhaps scratch your back in ecstasy. The name of the product: *Hypnotic poison*. She is going to kill you, and you will love every minute of it. What about the bottle? Sort of roundish and bloodish, perhaps something inside you? Perhaps a womb, for example. She is going to hold on to you, after she has scratched you. And all this is going to happen because of Christian Dior. Another myth.

Figures 3 shows an advertisement for a man’s fragrance, a ‘real’ man’s fragrance.
The ‘real’ man is doing something dangerous. He is sky boarding, an extreme sport connoting freedom, power, pleasure, coolness, courage. What about the colors? Black, silver, grey, red and blue. Compared to the Dior advertisement above with its hot colors, the colors here are cool. And coolness is what men need. Remember: Women are passionate, men are cool. What about the shape of the bottle? Probably a phallic symbol. And you can unscrew the top. Just Extreme Polo Sport by Ralph Lauren.

Let us have a look at some other perfume advertisement:
This is Paco Rabanne Ultraviolet Man. The product suggests that for a modern man it cannot just be a perfume, it has to be a *new perfume system*. How can there be anything such as a perfume system? Inconceivable, it’s just a perfume. But this perfume is a system because men are systematic, logical, rational, clear, cool, and not emotional. Men don’t cry… What about the color? What about the background? What about the picture? What about his hair? What about the man? What does he look like? From outer space with a demanding look. Perhaps someone borrowed from *Star Trek* or *Matrix*, he is in outer space. This is cool because of the cool color, blue, which is connected to space. You have the Milky Way behind him, and he is floating in space – we know that he is floating rather than standing on the earth because of the bottle of perfume is not connected to any surface.

Can we now predict the advertisement for the woman fragrance? Let us say Paco Rabanne Ultraviolet, it will not say *system* because it doesn’t do anything for women, remember, they are unsystematic. What is our prediction about the color? Pinkish, reddish, probably. That’s the color, and there will be the milky way again, and so on, pretty similar probably, and the dress? The hair? What kind of hair will she have? Alright, straight or short hair, basically. What about the dress? Probably pretty tightly fitting, nothing loose and airy. What is our prediction for the shape of the perfume bottle? Not phallic and blue, but round and red. Here is the advertisement. Please check our predictions.

Fig. 5: Paco Rabanne Ultraviolet Woman.
http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_7yqWRHRAihk/SqON7dg3TeI/AAAAAAAADWw/q8EtZ77EWmU/s400/paco_rabanne_ultraviolet_advertising_fragrance.jpeg [15 Jan 2013].
Let’s now look at the structure of an advertisement. I analyze advertisements on three different levels, on a pragmatic level, on a semantic level and on a semiotic\(^2\) level.

On the pragmatic level, what you get is an appeal to buy, to buy the product, and normally this appeal to buy is put into words and expressions like *enjoy*, *try*, *use*, *new*, *better*, *now*, *just for you* and so on. And remember, when an advertisement says *you*, it does not mean you. The advertisement has no idea about you.

On the semantic level, this means on the level of meaning production, we have a proposition that consists of an argument and a predicate. The argument is about product identity, the product itself, whatever it is, and the predicate is about some quality that is ascribed to the product. In a car advertisement it’s *Vorsprung durch Technik* or it’s *Freude am Fahren* or whatever. In an advertisement for a perfume or shower gel it is *If you smell like that, you will have hundreds of men or women running after you* (e.g. Axe). The product is good for you and advertisers use metaphors, connotation, myth, as we have seen for example, and what it suggests is things like happiness, love, beauty, peace, power, eternal youth, a perfect life and so on.

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\(^2\) I use the term *semiotics* here for what actually is limited to visual analysis, i.e. the analysis of the semiotic potentials of still images.

Fig. 6: Breguet Classique 7787 model chronometer. *TIME*, 21 January 2013.
This ad shows a watch, a Breguet Classique 7787 model chronometer, which will be interpreted as beautiful as a result of the aesthetically pleasing visual composition of shapes and colors in the ad. It represents a fantasy about combining beauty, function, professionalism with the mystery of the moon. So this is just beautiful, this is iconically beautiful, sort of a perfect instrument that puts a man in control of day and night. So we also have the beauty of professionalism in time management.

Fig. 7: Calvin Klein Eternity.

Here is an example of a contiguity relationship to beauty. This is a fragrance again, a perfume. Which bottle is for men, which is for women? By now you should be ready to answer this question. The bigger one is for men. Do you realize that you are exposed to these concepts through the discourse every single day for about 16 hours? The bigger one is for men. This is natural. He is beautiful, she is beautiful. The little boy is beautiful. And this man has a beautiful wife, and they have a beautiful son. We have the product in combination with beauty and happiness in a family. This is what will happen to you if you use this product.
And then you go shopping in this beautiful place in order to look and be seen, in order to fulfil your voyeuristic and exhibitionist dreams. We all have these to variable degrees. So you go shopping in this beautiful mall, Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milano. Milano is famous for its style, fashion and opera. It is named after Vittorio Emanuele, the first king of the United Italy (1861). This shopping mall was built in 1867. And you go there in order to buy things because you have got money, because you are a consumer and you want to be seen consuming if you want to belong to this society, this new Italian society. We consume because we want to be happy. And this is not an interpretation, but this is actually expressed in the following advertisement:
Kauf dich glücklich! It’s no longer fulfilment in personal relationships, it’s no longer fulfilment in jobs, fulfilling moral and ethical standards, idealism, social work, or the like that make you happy. It is consumption, buy and consume in order to be happy! Buy, buy!

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